SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY IN CONFORMITY WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

JUNE, 1935

BY

DAVID LOVETT

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SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION

Modern studies in eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare have clearly proved that the exaltation of his drama began many decades before the Romantic Movement. A gradual progression may indeed be noted from a mixed attitude of condemnation and approval to a full acceptance of his plays as utterly devoid of faults. Since the appeal of his characters played a prominent part in this progression, a study of their criticism during the period helps to clarify the tendencies which led ultimately to Romantic criticism, and, incidentally, to further an understanding of many phases of the modern approach to his drama.

Interest in the characters as such may be early observed in the writings of Dryden, Gildon, Rowe, and Steele; later, in much more detail, in the work of Joseph Warton, Samuel Johnson, William Richardson, Thomas Whately, John Philip Kemble, Maurice Morgann, Richard Cumberland, Henry Mackenzie, Thomas Robertson, and others. Although the fables or plots were condemned throughout the century because they tended to violate the unities, poetic justice, and decorum, the characters seemed usually to please, despite their admitted individuality, or, indeed, often because of it. This approval played a significant part in the eventual abandonment of the primacy of fable for that of character—an undoubtedly anti-Aristotelian tendency, leading directly to Coleridge's dictum that the plot of a play is merely the canvas or background for the characters.

Shakespeare was widely hailed throughout the century as "the poet of nature," partly because of his irregularity, unrestraint, and spontaneity, but most frequently because of the "realism" of his characters and scenes. On this score critics defended his tragi-comedy, his historical inaccuracies, his lack of decorum, the individuality and originality of his characters, his violation of poetic justice, his use of vulgar diction, and his employment of both low and supernatural characters. The same emphasis upon realism led to a fuller appreciation and endorsement of the realistic school of acting headed by Garrick, and also to extensive analyses of human nature as exemplified in the characters. Many critics judged him to be a "scientific" psychologist and a moral philosopher for his ability to present

an accurate picture of human life and the workings of the human mind.

From the start of the century, however, there was another tendency at work, which avoided rational analysis of characters and the passions that motivated them, and asserted, instead, that Shakespeare's excellence lay in his *expression* rather than *description* of the passions, that his art was not so much the imitation as the instrument of nature, that his method was not that of reason and observation but of intuition, that his characters were struck out whole and to be judged through impressions, not through fact. The Romantic critics likewise rejected the conception of Shakespeare's realism as founded upon mere observation and did not fully apply contemporary psychological theories to his characters, but they carried his power over reality into the inner life, frequently "beyond nature," and thus emphasized his imagination, his dependence upon meditation within, and his universal soul. They made him the very "morning star of philosophy." In the final analysis, however, their criticism was simply the attempt to rationalize the same sense of living reality that even such early critics as Gildon and Rowe had felt. To an age that worshipped reason that feeling was explained by a rational analysis undertaken to prove character-consistency. To an age of impressionism, the same feeling was explained through emphasis upon imagination, intuition, and divine inspiration. Apparent inconsistencies in characterization were accounted for by the former age through abstract reasoning; by the latter, through the poet's original creativeness.

From a study of this nature, one may gain a certain insight into the mind of the eighteenth century, into its attitude towards literature, into its own peculiar way of reaching towards truth through narrow restrictions and prejudices. And because Shakespeare was appealed to, however wrongly, by phychologist, moralist, and philosopher throughout the century for assistance in their respective fields of investigation, his characters must be considered of importance not only to the dramatist, the critic, and the student of literature, but to all who seek to understand the life of earlier periods and the history of ideas. A study of the past criticism of his plays will, in some way or other, help us to capture the attitudes, the beliefs, the temper of every age that knew him.

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SHAKESPEARE AS A POET OF REALISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By David Lovett

> . . . think ye see
> The very persons of our noble story
> As they were living.
>
> —*Henry VIII*, Prologue.

The impression many critics of the eighteenth century received that Shakespeare was a realist resulted in part from a comparison of his work with their own contemporary drama. Allusion was made to the " aliveness " of his characters, their similarity to persons of everyday life, the feeling one experienced that they were actually " flesh and blood," created by a mind and genius that fully understood all the principles of human nature and the workings of the human spirit — all this in contrast to the artificial classic and moralistic drama of the period. Steele, for example, advised all who would gain eminence in dramatic writing " to read Shakespeare with care; and they will soon be deterred from putting forth what is usually called tragedy," for " the way of common writers in this kind is rather the description than the expression of sorrow." [1] " As to the Characters; " wrote John Armstrong,

> if it was not for a very few Exceptions, one would think the Art of drawing them was lost amongst our dramatic Writers. Those that appear in most of our modern Plays, Tragedies call them or Comedies, are like bad Portraits; which indeed represent the human Features, but without Life or Meaning, or those distinguishing Strokes which, in the incomparable Hogarth and in every great History Painter, make you imagine you have seen such Persons as appear in the Picture.[2]

Richard Hole held that people contemplated, in Shakespeare's

[1] *Tatler*, No. 47. Lord Kames later made the same distinction between the description and expression of the passions in his widely-read *Elements of Criticism*, chapter 16. Hazlitt also held that the plays of Shakespeare are properly expressions of the passions, not descriptions of them.

[2] " Of the Versification of English Tragedy," in *Sketches or Essays on Various Subjects*, 2nd ed., 1758, pp. 43-4. Hogarth, indeed, frequently expressed the opinion that painting should approximate reality.

plays, men like themselves, whereas in the pompous characters of declamatory tragedy, they saw beings of another species.[3]

But, whatever the reason, the impression of reality remained widespread. To Pope, Shakespeare was "not so much an Imitator, as an Instrument, of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her as that she speaks thro' him. His *Characters* are so much Nature her self, that 'tis a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as Copies of her."[4]

That Dr. Johnson was impressed by the realistic elements in Shakespeare's plays is readily apparent. In the preface to his edition he wrote:

> *Shakespeare*, whether life or nature be his subject, shews plainly that he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of any other mind; the ignorant feel his representations to be just, and the learned see that they are compleat.[5]

Indeed, in defending Shakespeare's tragi-comedy, he proclaimed, "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature." This apparently represented a use of *nature* in the sense of realism. But Johnson would not accept the whole of real life as suitable for dramatic representation. Morality was to be considered also; hence Shakespeare was at fault in violating poetic justice. On at least one occasion, however, he yielded to his sense of realism even on this point:

> Whatever pleasure there may be in seeing crimes punished and virtue rewarded, yet, since wickedness often prospers in real life, the poet is certainly at liberty to give it prosperity on the stage. For if poetry has an imitation of reality, how are its laws broken by exhibiting the world in its true form? The stage may sometimes

[3] *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen, at Exeter*, 1796, p. 270.

[4] Preface to his Edition of Shakespeare 1, p. ii. Pope anticipates the Romantic critics in believing that nature acted through Shakespeare, or "created" real, living characters through him. Martin Sherlock found this passage quite unintelligible: "Pope wrote a preface to this edition, in which there is this remarkable phrase [the passage quoted above] . . . Pope was the clearest writer in England, and these words are scarce intelligible. The reason is plain; he spoke of what he felt, and he felt more than language could express" (*New Letters from an English Traveller*, translated from the French, 1781, p. 184).

All references in this article to editions of Shakespeare by Rowe, Pope, Theobald, and Johnson are based on the first editions.

[5] 1, p. xlii.

gratify our wishes; but, if it be truly the *mirror of life*, it ought to show us sometimes what we are to expect.[6]

When we consider the stress generally laid upon the importance of moral considerations in the drama, not only in Rymer's criticism, but also in the criticism of those who attacked him, especially Dryden,[7] we cannot help looking upon this quotation as one of the highly important utterances made in eighteenth-century criticism. It was more than Johnson's particular brand of common sense, frequently given as the sole explanation of his drift away from the rules, that prompted this and other liberal expressions; it was, indeed, the culmination of a drive against the rules by critics who advocated realism in the drama, a drive which began with the admission of the "naturalness" of tragi-comedy earlier in the century.[8]

Shakespeare was the true poet of nature in the opinion of the Augustan critics. The attention of some was directed, in this criticism, to his irregularities and wildness. Corneille and Jonson represented the proper application of the rules, and stood for art and polish; Shakespeare was an original genius who followed nature in its crude, original form, untouched by the hand of art. The epithet "poet of nature" was employed also to refer to Shakespeare's knowledge of external nature; but by the great majority of writers it was used to suggest or denote the dramatist's understanding of *human* nature in its truest and most realistic guise.

When critics referred to Shakespeare's plays as a mirror of life, they usually had in mind the following elements: the imitation of ordinary activities and experiences of life;[9] the

[6] *Lives*, ed. Birkbeck Hill, 2. 135. On another occasion as well Johnson conceded that the conditions of actual life justify the violation of poetic justice: "Dryden, petulantly and indecently, denies the heroism of Adam in Paradise Lost because he was overcome; but there is no reason why the hero should not be unfortunate except established practice, since success and virtue do not go necessarily together" (*ibid.* 1. 176). Previously, of course, Addison had struck a damaging blow at the doctrine of poetic justice (*Spectator*, no. 40).

[7] ". . . Poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must be ethical. Indeed, the poet dresses truth, and adorns nature, but does not alter them. . . ." (*A Defense of An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*, in *Essays of Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, 1. 121).

[8] Cf. Gildon, "An Essay on the Art, Rise and Progress of the Stage . . .," in Rowe's ed. of Shakespeare, 7 (1710), p. ix.

[9] In a note to *The Winter's Tale*, Johnson asserted: "This vehement retractation of *Leontes*, accompanied with the confession of more crimes than he was suspected

consistency and preservation of characters, which made the poet a philosopher of human nature and a great psychologist; the reflection of universal sentiments and truths; the faithful delineation of individual characters as distinct from one another as one might expect to find them in actual life; the presentation of the varied scene of life; and the power of causing the reader to recognize his own feelings and emotions in those of the characters.

The first of these elements is recognized in the remarks of Dr. Johnson which are quoted above. The second, the consistency and preservation of character, was dependent, it was thought, upon Shakespeare's wonderful knowledge of the passions. This feature of his art was emphasized by almost every critic from Dryden on, but it was uppermost in the minds of the later critics. As a matter of fact, the later contrasts between characters — especially those between Richard III and Macbeth — were entered upon to show the careful preservation of initial traits from the beginning to the very end of the action.[10] Shakespeare was the real philosopher of the human mind. Mackenzie wrote that although Shakespeare "cared little to construct his stories well or make his incidents probable, but took them at random from tale or romance," still "he never erred in the human mind; and, in impossible situations, his persons speak the language of the heart, and speak in character."[11] This recognition of Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature — on the basis of which he was able to delineate characters, consistent and true to life — led to definite psychological analyses of the passions that motivated each character; and frequently the character itself was forgotten in the analysis of

of, is agreeable to our daily experience of the vicissitudes of violent tempers, and the eruptions of minds oppressed with guilt" (ed. of Shakespeare 2. 280).

[10] Cf. Thomas Whately, *Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare*, 1785; and J. P. Kemble, *Macbeth Reconsidered*, 1786. Consistency of character-portrayal was a principle generally accepted by the Augustans, and expounded in some detail in Bossu's well-known treatise on the epic. For an extended application of this principle in English criticism, cf. John Dennis, *Remarks on Prince Arthur*, 1696, Part I, chapters 2 and 4. Among the critics of Shakespeare such consistency came to mean much more: particularly, a consistently realistic presentation of character based on a deep understanding of human passions and motives, without which a good character can neither be created nor maintained.

[11] *Mirror*, No. 99 (April 18, 1780).

passions. For example, Dr. Johnson, in a note to *King John,* wrote (ed. of Shakespeare 2. 222) :

In *Much Ado about Nothing,* the father of *Hero,* depressed by her disgrace, declares himself so subdued by grief that *a thread may lead him.* How is it that grief in *Leonato* and *lady Constance,* produces effects directly opposite, and yet both agreeable to nature. Sorrow softens the mind while it is yet warmed by hope, but hardens it when it is congealed by despair. Distress, while there remains any prospect of relief, is weak and flexible, but when succour remains, is fearless and stubborn; angry alike at those that injure, and at those that do not help; careless to please where nothing can be gained, and fearless to offend where there is nothing further to be dreaded. Such was this writer's knowledge of the passions.

The individuality of the characters was also related to the question of their realism. This relationship becomes readily apparent when we consider that type-portraiture, by its very nature, is eventually bound to become artificial and lifeless. It was one of the tenets of neo-classicism, however, that characters in the drama, like images in poetry, should be typical or general, not individual.[12] This requirement meant, in practice, one of three things: (1) that each character should follow a classic model;[13] (2) that each should possess certain traditionally accepted and recommended "class" or "occupational" qualities;[14] (3) that each should be based upon certain general, not necessarily traditional, characteristics common to his class or to all mankind, with the addition of "accidental" qualities discovered in the experiences of daily life. Here again Shakespeare gave the neo-classic critic considerable cause for embarrassment, since his characters could not find a place in the first two categories of types, although they usually tended to please despite their individuality, or, indeed, often because of it.

[12] Cf. Johnson, *Rambler,* No. 36 (July 21, 1750).

[13] Cf. Dennis's discussion of Horace's character of Achilles in his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear,* in *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare,* ed. D. N. Smith, Glasgow, 1903, pp. 39-40. The reverence for authority, or the general inertia of English criticism at the time, was so great that no one questioned Horace's interpretation of the character. In a recent lecture delivered before the Tudor and Stuart Club of the Johns Hopkins University (see *ELH* for December, 1935), Professor E. E. Stoll discussed and convincingly attacked this interpretation.

[14] Thus a king must act in a "kingly" manner; and a woman must always be "feminine," by which was ordinarily understood gentleness, decency, and modesty. Cf. Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor,* 1770, 1. 88, 99-100.

As far as the third category was concerned, Johnson, for one, proclaimed Shakespeare's characters as general in the sense that they embodied universal traits, and in his Preface, he praised them for that reason.

Rymer, who could not see Othello and Iago as typical, conventional figures, was too much a believer in the accepted critical dogmas to praise them for being individuals. He carried his beliefs to their logical extreme and would not allow for any exceptions. Consequently, Shakespeare's characterization in *Othello* outraged him. The love and jealousy of Othello were, he wrote, " no part of a Souldiers Character, unless for Comedy." Iago was the most intolerable of all, for he is not the soldier Horace described in the character of Achilles.[15] Rowe also occasionally criticized the characters according to type. He looked upon Parolles, correctly enough, as an illustration of " the parasite and the vain-glorious." His discussion of Hamlet proceeded to compare the melancholy Dane with a classic model, Orestes.[16] Gildon wrote of certain characters in *King John* that, " whatever the Ladies of the stocks-market might do, Queens and Princesses can never be supposed to talk at that rate." [17] As long as this neo-classic belief held sway Shakespeare had little chance of attaining an unexceptionable position of honor, unless, like Johnson, one felt the " excellence " of generalized characterization in his plays. Francis Gentleman was following the dictates of type-portraiture when he wrote:

> The expressions he [Macbeth] uses to the servant or officer who enters with intelligence of the English army are low and gross, far beneath even a private gentleman; and why Shakespeare should make a monarch run into such vulgarisms is not easy to guess; for the rage or grief of a king should always preserve peculiar dignity, without which the author cannot boast a chaste preservation of character. . . .[18]

Mrs. Lennox also betrayed her sympathy with the school of types when she agreed in general with Rymer on the " unsoldier-like " traits of Iago; but then she immediately justified that character by placing him in the category of " Italians."

[15] *A Short View of Tragedy*, 1693, pp. 93-4.
[16] Preface to Shakespeare 1, pp. xix, xxxi-xxxii.
[17] " Remarks," Rowe's Shakesp. 7. 340.
[18] *The Dramatic Censor* 1. 99-100.

" Iago," she wrote, " was a Soldier, it is true, but he was also an *Italian*; he was born in a Country remarkable for the deep Art, Cruelty, and revengeful Temper of its Inhabitants." [19] It is clear that she was forced by the practice of Shakespeare to particularize a conventional type, to make of the " classic " soldier an " Italian " soldier.

This particularization illustrates one of the main tendencies of character-criticism during the eighteenth century, and it is further remarkably exemplified by Henry Pemberton. To him characters were either general or particular. By the general class, he meant those who exhibited traits common to a nation, rank, or division of society — traits which resulted from differences in country, age, sex, birth, and fortune, as Horace had drawn up classes in the progressive ages of man; by the particular class, he referred to those in whom sentiment and general manners were diversified according to the different temper and passions of each individual. " This," he wrote, " is the part of poetry, in which the divine invention is most eminently distinguished. To this general manners and sentiment are only the outline." [20] Only the outline! What would Rymer have said to that! [21]

Doctor Johnson, however, looked upon each character of

[19] *Shakespear Illustrated*, 1753-4, 2. 129.

[20] *Observations on Poetry*, 1738, p. 45.

[21] This tendency to particularize according to the different temper and passions of individuals is discernible throughout the progress of the character-essay in its development into the novel. The " Country Gentleman " of Overbury had no name or local habitat; Sir Roger de Coverley, however, was the same character particularized not only in that he possessed a name, and that he lived in Worcestershire, and in Soho Square when he went to London, but in many individual traits. The earlier essay was a collection of characteristics, epigrammatically expressed and satirically intended; Sir Roger was a highly individualized literary product. Squire Western represents a further particularization of the type in many different respects. Fielding himself tells us of the necessity to individualize a type used as the starting-point for the depiction of a character: " Thou art to know, friend, that there are certain characteristics in which most individuals of every profession and occupation agree. To be able to preserve these characteristics, and at the same time to diversify their operations, is one talent of a good writer. Again, to mark the nice distinction between two persons actuated by the same vice or folly is another; and, as this last talent is found in very few writers, so is the true discernment of it found in as few readers . . ." (*The History of Tom Jones*, Bk. X, ch. 1). In a general discussion on comedy, the writer of an essay in the *Lounger* pointed out that " modern " dramatists are better than the ancients because they portray the smaller discriminations into which the general classes subdivide themselves (No. 49, Jan. 7, 1785).

Shakespeare as a species, not an individual. To his way of thinking, they acted according to the universal laws of human nature even though they had in addition particular "accidental" qualities. In the following passage, he clearly departed from the generally accepted meaning of types, in what should be stressed as a break with traditional criticism, of like significance with his defence of tragi-comedy and the violation of the unities:

> His [Shakespeare's] adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of criticks, who form their judgments upon narrower principles. *Dennis* and *Rhymer* think his *Romans* not sufficiently Roman; and *Voltaire* censures his kings as not completely royal. . . . But *Shakespeare* always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men.[22]

In such a statement Johnson succeeded in turning the tables upon the earlier neo-classic critics by accusing them of not following "general nature" in their criticism. Too cautious and too conservative to attack the whole principle of generalized characterization, he created a new "class," broader and more universal — to be sure, mankind itself. From the orthodox neo-classic point of view, he would have had to admit that the characters were in most cases decidedly individualistic. This probably accounts for the contradiction he almost fell into when he had to write in the Preface: "Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other." As Hazlitt later explained, Johnson was so intensely interested in general traits that he refused to emphasize, or failed even to observe, those that might be called individual.[23]

But Theobald [24] and Pope both expressed the opinion that the characters were individuals. In so doing, they emphasized Shakespeare's independence of models. "Those of other Poets," asserted Pope, "have a constant resemblance, which shews that they receiv'd them from one another, and were but multiplyers of the same image; each picture like a mock-rainbow

[22] Preface to Shakespeare I, p. xii.

[23] *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, in *Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, London, 1930, 4. 176.

[24] Preface to Shakespeare I, p. iii.

is but the reflexion of a reflexion." [25] "Nothing great," later wrote Mrs. Montagu, "is to be expected from any set of artists, who are to give only copies of copies. The treasures of nature are inexhaustible, as well in moral as in physical subjects. The talents of Shakespear were universal, his penetrating mind saw through all characters; and, as Mr. Pope says of him, he was not more a master of our strongest emotions than of our idlest sensations." [26] This attack on the imitation of literary models was taken up by many critics of the century. The greatest artists, asserted John Armstrong, "excell by their happy Skill in copying Nature: and if you content yourself with servilely copying them, without drawing immediately from the common Subject *Nature*; you will always be inferior to your Original, and have no Chance ever to produce anything great or striking." [27]

We have thus gone a long distance from the criticism of Rymer. These writers found praise for the subject of his most bitter attack. Every single character in Shakespeare was to Pope "as much an individual as those in Life itself." "It is impossible," he continued, "to find any two alike; and such as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be Twins, will upon comparison be found remarkably distinct." [28]

An interesting phase of Pope's attitude towards Shakespeare's characters is found in his explanation of their individuality partly by their unique and distinctive manner of speech. "To this life and variety of Character," he suggested, "we must add the wonderful preservation of it; which is such throughout his Plays, that had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker." [29] Gildon still earlier referred to this aspect of Shakespeare's characterization: "*Benedick*, and *Beatrice* are two sprightly, witty talkative Characters, and, tho' of the same Nature, yet perfectly distinguish'd, and you have no need to read the Names, to know who speaks." [30]

[25] Preface to Shakespeare 1, pp. ii-iii.
[26] *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear*, 1769, p. 65.
[27] *Sketches*, pp. 45-6.
[28] Preface to Shakespeare 1, p. iii.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] Rowe's ed. of Shakespeare 7. 305. See also 7, p. li.

Joseph Warton was impressed by the ability of both Homer and Shakespeare to make their personages speak in character.[31] Peter Whalley made the same reference to distinctiveness in speech and expression, along with a reiteration of the complete individuality of each character.[32] Cumberland, in the two quotations that follow, emphasized this point:

> . . . we observe a peculiarity in the language of Macbeth, which is highly characteristic; I mean the figurative turn of his expressions, whenever his imagination strikes upon any gloomy subject.
>
> The critic of language will observe that here is a redundancy and crowd of metaphors, but the critic will acknowledge that it is the very truth of character. . . .[33]

On the grounds of preservation of character, Shakespeare was excused by the *Universal Magazine* for his too violent language in Posthumas' strictures upon women:

> That this passionate rhapsody against the fair sex, is much too highly overcharged, does not admit a doubt; yet such rancorous sentiments were to be expected from a man, just made acquainted with supposed injuries from a woman, whom he had always considered as the most perfect of her sex. At the same time it shews us how capable Shakespeare was of expressing in suitable language the most impassioned sentiments.[34]

Robert Alves believed that Shakespeare was universally correct in his speeches: "Even in the composition of an epistle, short *billet-doux*, or ordinary prose-conversation, Shakespear's language is extremely characteristic and proper."[35] Since it was customary during a great part of the eighteenth century to conceal one's real character, not to display it, this commendation for "natural" expression in language, incorrect as the critic's judgment was on many occasions, constitutes a vital break with Augustan tendencies. Indeed, in a letter to John

[31] *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 1782, 2. 321. Warton displays opposition to general terms and general criticism throughout this work. Addison made a similar comment on Homer: "There is scarce a speech or action in the *Iliad*, which the reader may not ascribe to the person who speaks or acts, without seeing his name at the head of it" (*Spectator*, No. 273).

[32] *Enquiry into the Learning of Shakespeare*, 1748, p. 21.

[33] *Observer*, No. 71 (1785).

[34] 88 (1791). 353.

[35] *Literary Essays*, in *Sketches of a History of Literature*, Edinburgh, 1794, Essay 1, p. 192.

Pinkerton, dated Oct. 6, 1784, Horace Walpole criticized Miss Burney's *Cecilia* because she labored too much to make her personages talk in character.[36]

This question of appropriate language in characterization is related to the more general one of "poetic diction," the diction which had arisen largely through the neo-classic emphasis on universality, and its preference for the abstract, the general, and the typical. It had helped to make the language of poetry vague, trite, and conventional.[37] Shakespeare's diction was, on the contrary, fresh, vivid, concrete and, to a certain extent, individualized. Lord Kames makes clear the influence of the dramatist in this respect:

> Abstract or general terms have no good effect in any composition for amusement; because it is only of particular objects that images can be formed. Shakespeare's style in that respect is excellent: every article in his descriptions is particular, as in nature; and if accidentally a vague expression slip in, the blemish is discernible by the bluntness of its impression.[38]

But the characters were widely praised in the eighteenth century for their individuality, whether or not this quality happened to be attributed to their manner of speech or their diction. James Beattie, for example, in a letter to Robert Arbuthnot, of Dec. 12, 1762, remarked in reference to Tasso: "His characters, though different, are not always distinct, and want those masterly and distinguishing strokes which the genius of Homer and Shakespeare, and of them only, knows how to delineate."[39] Elsewhere he affirmed Shakespeare's ability to create characters of his own, without having to imitate classic types: "And indeed, though many have made the attempt, Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton, are almost the only poets who have succeeded in the invention of such characters as are at once natural, adapted to the strain of the composition, and different from all that had appeared before."[40] Thomas Whately

[36] *Literary Correspondence of John Pinkerton,* 1830, 1. 53-4.

[37] Cf. R. D. Havens, "The Poetic Diction of the English Classicists," *Kittredge Anniversary Papers,* Boston, 1913, p. 440.

[38] *Elements of Criticism,* 7th ed., Edinburgh, 1788, 2. 352.

[39] Sir Wm. Forbes, *Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie,* 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1807, 1. 186.

[40] *Elements of Moral Science,* Pt. 4, chap. 1, in *Works,* Philadelphia, 1809, 9. 223.

made a direct attack upon those dramatists who were content to depict generalized characters:

> Yet the generality of dramatic writers, and more especially of those who have chosen tragedy for their subject, have contented themselves with the distant resemblance, which indiscriminate expressions of passion, and imperfect, because general, marks of character can give. Elevated ideas become the hero; a professed contempt of all principles denotes a villain; frequent gusts of rage betray a violence, and tender sentiments show a mildness, of disposition. But a villain differs not more from a saint, than he does in some particulars from another as bad as himself; and the same degrees of anger, excited by the same occasions, break forth in as many several shapes, as there are various tempers.[41]

Tom Davies saw that "it is the peculiar privilege of Shakespeare to draw characters of the most singular form, and such as, though acknowledged to come from nature's mint, had never entered into the mind of any other writer, ancient or modern."[42] In 1796, Richard Hole wrote what may be accepted as the general attitude of later criticism: "Other dramatic poets deal in *generals,* Shakespeare in *individuals.* Other poets treat of kings, queens, and heroes, in the *abstract,* he *particularizes* them."[43]

When one considers the growing interest in Shakespearean character-study throughout the century, one must emphasize its dependence upon this notion that a character may be an "original" person, not necessarily a type or an imitation of a classic figure. Dr. Johnson held on tenaciously to the belief that "in the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species." Rymer, convinced that the characters could not be called "types" according to *his* accepted standards, had shown his utter contempt for them as dramatic creations. Pope and Theobald early, and many others later, praised the individualized portraiture which Rymer had denounced as an abomination of art. But towards the end of the century it became no longer necessary even to emphasize, as Johnson had, whatever universal elements in these characters could be found. They were accepted and praised as individuals.

[41] *Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare,* 3rd ed., 1839, pp. 23-4.
[42] *Dramatic Miscellanies,* 1783-4, 2. 288.
[43] *Essays By a Society of Gentlemen, at Exeter,* p. 251.

The interest in the consistent and "recognizable" traits of human nature and in the originality of the characters was frequently accompanied by a similar interest in the fullness and diversity of life as presented by the dramatist. There were many references in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to Shakespeare's wide range of characterization, such as Theobald's enthusiastic utterance in his Preface: "What Variety of Originals, and how differing each from the other!" Much of the later criticism was devoted to a detailed analysis of these characters with the result that Shakespeare was often praised for having all the passions and emotions of life at his disposal. Thus Mackenzie pointed out that his genius "gives him an opportunity of delineating the passions and affections of the human mind, as they exist in reality, *with all the various colourings which they receive in the mixed scenes of life*; not as they are accommodated by the hands of more artificial poets, to one great undivided impression, or an uninterrupted chain of congenial events."[44] Davies wrote: "This man combined, in his imagination, all the possibilities of human action with all the varieties of situation and passion."[45] Robert Alves gives us an excellent illustration of the fullness of Shakespeare's world, real and imaginative:

> It is certain Shakespear possessed the highest degree of natural genius. Comprehensive and vast, he takes hold of nature in all her varieties of human character: He catches her in every shape; the ludicrous, the solemn, the beautiful, the terrible. He even penetrates the wilds of romance, and bodies forth, with his magic pencil, in this airy region, characters unknown, unheard of. A new race of creatures speak and move with strange limbs, strange sensations; all wild and extravagant, yet delightfully marvellous, strangely natural, and highly worthy of the matchless author.[46]

To Mackenzie this genuinely diversified completeness placed Shakespeare above the Greek dramatists, whose characterization consisted "chiefly of those general maxims which the wisdom of the schools might inculcate, which a borrowed

[44] *Mirror*, No. 100 (April 22, 1780). The writer is careful to make clear that this necessitated a departure "from the regularity of the drama" and sprang from "an ignorance of those critical rules which might have restrained him within it." The italics in the quotation are mine.

[45] *Dramatic Miscellanies* 2. 288.

[46] *Sketches*, Essay I, pp. 187-8.

experience might teach." But Shakespeare's delineation of manners "marks the knowledge of intimacy with mankind," and presents the "abstract of life in all its modes. . . ." [47] Lyttleton put in the mouth of Pope the following words: "If human nature were destroyed, and no monument left of it except [Shakespeare's] works, other beings might know *what man was* from those writings." [48]

There was one explanation of this ability, advanced in the seventeenth century by Margaret Cavendish and in the eighteenth century by a number of critics, which clearly anticipates Coleridge. This was the belief that the author could enter at will the mind and body of any character of his creation. Thus Mrs. Montagu wrote:

> Shakespear seems to have had the art of the Dervise, in the Arabian Tales, who could throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation.[49]

Because of the realistic impression of the characters, a sense of personal relationship was frequently experienced by spectator, reader, and critic. "Shakespear's dramatic personae are men," wrote Mrs. Montagu, "frail by constitution, hurt by ill habits, faulty and unequal. But they speak with human voices, are actuated by human passions, and are engaged in the common affairs of human life. We are interested in what they do, or say, by feeling every moment that they are of the same nature as ourselves." [50] Need we go any further than Dr. Johnson for an expression of the same idea? —

> *Shakespeare* has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion. . . .[51]

There is not a great change from this point of view to the

[47] *Lounger*, No. 68 (May 20, 1786).

[48] *Dialogues of the Dead*, in *Works*, 1774, Dialogue 14, p. 403.

[49] *Essay on . . . Shakespear*, p. 37. Coleridge made the same observation: "It is easy to clothe imaginary beings with our own thoughts and feelings; but to send ourselves out of ourselves, to *think* ourselves into the thoughts and feelings of beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different from our own, *hic labor hoc opus*; and who has achieved it? Perhaps only Shakespeare" (*Letters*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, Boston and New York, 1895, 1. 372).

[50] *Essay on . . . Shakespear*, p. 81.

[51] Preface 1, p. xi.

general Romantic attitude towards the characters that they not only have a nature similar to the critic's but that they make him live their experiences, feel their emotions, and identify himself with them. Indeed Mackenzie wrote:

Finding such a character in real life, of a person endowed with feelings so delicate as to border on weakness, with sensibility too exquisite to allow of determined action, he has placed it where it could be best exhibited, in scenes of wonder, and terror, and of indignation, where its varying emotions might be most strongly marked, amidst the workings of imagination and the war of the passions. . . . As it is, we feel not only the virtues, but the weaknesses of Hamlet, as our own. . . .[52]

The inroads that a demand for a certain degree of realism made into rules and conventions has already been intimated in references to the justification for tragi-comedy and for individualized characters. Low scenes and low language, historical inaccuracies, and the use of supernatural characters were also defended on the same ground. As far as the first is concerned, we find towards the end of the century the following statements:

In Shakespeare as in real life, buffoonery is mixed with sublimity. Such is man.[53]

Shakespeare's low characters have so curious and so perfect a resemblance to nature, that they must always please.[54]

[52] *Mirror*, No. 99. Apply the last sentence to Coleridge, and he is, indeed, Hamlet!

[53] *Analytical Review* 5 (1789). 568. This and the next three notes are cited by R. W. Babcock, *The Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry*, University of North Carolina Press, 1931, pp. 72, 71, 130.

[54] *The Bee* 4 (1791). 293. By the middle of the century the demand for realism was strong enough to justify the appearance in literature of plain and homely touches, of local color, of details peculiar to certain localities, even though they were realistic to the point of lacking elegance. In noticing Percy's *Reliques*, the *Critical Review* observed (19 [1765]. 119-31): "The manners not only of their ages, but the provinces where they lived, are delineated by the truest pencil, that of Nature; and however homely her strokes may sometimes be, the resemblance is always just, and therefore pleasing." Even in tragedy the introduction of "low" characters was justified if they were depicted in a manner that was natural and realistic. For example, the criticism of Home's *Douglas* in the *Monthly Review* (16 [1757]. 426 ff.) found the chief virtue of that play to be its happy descriptions of "Those parts of Nature, and that rural simplicity, with which the Author was, perhaps, best acquainted." Cf. Edward N. Hooker, "The Reviewers and the New Trends in Poetry, 1754-1770," forthcoming in *Modern Language Notes*. The identification of "nature" with realism, and the insistence that art which follows realism faithfully and in detail, "however homely her strokes may sometimes be," *must* give pleasure, were tendencies of immense consequence in the criticism of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare has drawn low characters and ludicrous scenes with the same unrivalled propriety as the sublime and prophetic.[55]

Shakespear makes his very bombast answer his purpose by the persons he chuses to utter it.[56]

It was affirmed in *The Mirror* of the Lady Anne scene in *Richard III:*

> Through the whole of this scene, our abhorence, our disgust, and contempt excited by cruelty, falsehood, meanness, and insignificance of mind, are so counterbalanced by the feelings that arise on the view of ability, self-possession, knowledge of character, and the masterly display of human nature, as that, instead of impairing, they rather contribute force to the general sensation of pleasure.[57]

Morgann, perhaps, offers the best illustration of this attitude: "But, after all, what have we to do with indecorums? Indecorums respect the propriety or impropriety of exhibiting certain actions; — not their *truth* or *falsehood* when exhibited. Shakespeare stands to us in the place of *truth* and *nature:* If we desert this principle we cut the turf from under us. . . ." [58]

The historical inaccuracies in the plays also found a certain defense on the grounds of realistic motivation. But in the early part of the century, the tendency was to attack Shakespeare for this fault. Dennis openly objected to historical blunders, finding no dramatic excuse for them. He wrote that the "Characters are always drawn justly, exactly, graphically, except where he fail'd by not knowing History or the Poetical Art"; and he added that "If *Shakespear* had these great Qualities by Nature, what would he not have been, if he had join'd to so happy a Genius Learning and the Poetical Art? For want of the latter, our Author has sometimes made gross Mistakes in the

[55] *Ibid.* 16 (1793). 274.

[56] *Anthologia Hibernica* 3 (1794). 17.

[57] No. 66 (Dec. 25, 1779).

[58] *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Falstaff,* ed. W. A. Gill, London, 1912, pp. 43-4. There was, to be sure, the same tendency towards realism in the novel. Whereas Richardson and Sarah Fielding stressed the moral element, declaring that novelists should depict life in an idealistic rather than a sordidly realistic fashion, Fielding and Smollett advocated a thoroughly realistic depiction of contemporary life. Critics as well as novelists emphasized truthful characterization along with careful plot development. Although romantic fiction later became popular as a result of Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic romances, realism continued to be employed in the novel throughout the remainder of the century.

Characters which he has drawn from History, against the Equality and Conveniency of Manners of his Dramatical Persons." [59] Johnson was rather stern in his condemnation of historical inaccuracies. The two quotations that follow will serve to make this clear:

Shakespeare deserts the manners of the age in which his drama is placed very often, without necessity or advantage.[60]

. . . though he so nicely discriminates, and so minutely describes the characters of men, he commonly neglects and confounds the characters of ages, by mingling customs ancient and modern, *English* and foreign.[61]

Other writers tried to justify the historical inaccuracies, either on the basis of dramatic necessity or on an appeal to nature and realism. Thus Davies wrote: "In drawing the principal character of the play, the author has deviated somewhat from history; but, by abating the fierceness of Macbeth's disposition, he has rendered him a fitter subject for the drama." [62] But criticism went even a step further. Passages may be cited in which Shakespeare was considered almost equal in authority with history itself, since it was thought that he possessed an intuitive insight into all the facts of human nature. Davies was certain he could portray, through his very genius alone, the figures that history knew.[63] Richard Hole likewise contended that with his ability to understand and portray human nature, he could re-create the exact personages of the past:

His characters, whether those of kings and nobles, of clowns, constables, or pickpockets, Cade's licentious mob, or Henry's turbulent barons, are such genuine copies from life, that we must suppose the originals acted and spoke in the manner he represents them.[64]

Moreover, Mrs. Montagu was willing to give Shakespeare an "authority" equal to, or even greater than, the accepted histories of his day.

[59] *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear,* in *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare,* ed. D. N. Smith, Glasgow, 1903, pp. 25, 26.
[60] Note to *Richard II,* ed. of Shakespeare 4. 74.
[61] Note to *King Lear, ibid.* 6. 158.
[62] *Dramatic Miscellanies* 2. 148
[63] *Ibid.* 1. 352-3.
[64] *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen, at Exeter,* p. 250.

Poor Shakespear from the wooden images in our mean chronicles was to form his portraits. What judgment was there in discovering, that by moulding them to an exact resemblance he should engage and please! And what discernment and penetration into characters, and what amazing skill in moral painting, to be able, from such uncouth models, to bring forth not only a perfect, but, when occasion required, a graceful likeness!

The patterns from whence he drew were not only void of poetical spirit and ornament, but also of all historical dignity. The histories were a mere heap of rude undigested annals, coarse in their style, and crowded with trivial anecdotes. No Tacitus had investigated the obliquities of our statesmen, or by diving into the profound secrets of policy had dragged into light the latent motives, the secret machinations of our politicians: yet how does he enter into the deepest mysteries of state! [65]

Thus the realism of Shakespeare, his command of all that one could call human nature and living reality, was largely responsible for the development from an attitude of condemnation for historical inaccuracies to the belief that the poet, knowing life as he did, portrayed characters of the past in their truest light.

The supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays were, paradoxical as it may seem, also defended on the ground of "nature" and "reality." The reasoning behind this was that if such characters were actually existent, they would appear as Shakespeare had depicted them. Moreover, since "nature" was used to refer specifically to propriety and consistency of event, of character, of sentiment, and of language, these characters could be accepted, on such grounds, as "natural." Rowe, in alluding to Dryden's description of the supernatural elements as "magick," [66] went on to say: "It is the same Magick that raises the Fairies in *Midsummer Night's Dream,* the Witches in *Macbeth,* and the Ghost in *Hamlet,* with thoughts and language so proper to the parts they sustain, and so peculiar to the talent of this Writer." [67] Addison, very early in the century, called attention, however, to the "realistic" qualities of these characters: ". . . if there are such Beings in the

[65] *Essays on . . . Shakespear,* pp. 67-8. *The British Magazine* 8 (1767). 572, wrote: "The characters are all so admirably drawn that the true spirit of the Romans seems to breathe in them."

[66] Prologue to *The Tempest.*

[67] Preface 1, p. xxvi.

World, it looks highly probable that they should talk and act as he has represented them." [68] "Even where the agency is super-natural," wrote Johnson, "the dialogue is level with life." [69] The anonymous writer of the essay on *Hamlet*, which appeared in 1736, asserted:

> And it must moreover be observed as to his characters, that although there are some entirely of his own invention, and such as none but so great a Genius could invent; yet he is so remarkably happy in following of Nature, that (if I may so express it) he does it even in characters which are not in Nature. To clear up this Paradox, my Meaning is, that if we can but once suppose such characters to exist, then we must allow they must think and act exactly as he has described them.[70]

Mrs. Montagu wrote: "The Poet, who can give to splendid inventions, and to fictions new and bold, the air and authority of reality and truth, is master of the genuine sources of the Castalian spring, and may justly be said to draw his inspiration from the *well-head of pure poesy*." [71] This feeling of reality was recognized by the *Universal Magazine* to be genuine enough to deceive the critic:

> Though we know the character of Ariel to be merely the creation of Shakespeare's luxuriant imagination, we readily yield our assent to the supposition that such actions may be performed by ministering spirits, upon such occasions, and are pleased with the deception.[72]

All this leads directly to Lamb, who presented the case succinctly with the remark that the Witches and Caliban, though not human, follow consistently the laws of their own nature, and are thus never non-natural.[73]

There is a great deal of evidence to show that realism found much greater favor in comedy than in tragedy. In the first place, critics were agreed that comedy must reflect the manners of *contemporary* life, not life in general. In the second place, characters were not expected to conform to definite types, as

[68] *Spectator*, No. 419.
[69] Preface 1, p. xi.
[70] *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, p. 2.
[71] *Essay on . . . Shakespear*, pp. 134-5.
[72] 88 (January, 1791). 61.
[73] "Sanity of True Genius," *The Last Essays of Elia*, in *Works*, ed. E. V. Lucas, London, 1903, 2. 186.

they were in tragedy (cf. note 15, above). In the third place, from the days of Ben Jonson personal satire had appeared in English comedy, and this necessarily involved a certain measure of realism. In the fourth place, as characters rather than fable were generally emphasized in comedy, and as the characters were supposed to be concerned in commonplace incidents and commonplace sentiments, the comic poet was encouraged to present familiar and realistic matters subject to everyday observation. Furthermore, as critics came more and more to believe that diversion, not profit, was the proper end of comedy, there was scope afforded for the introduction of "low" and uninstructive characters; and "low" characters were most likely to be realistic.[73a] With these strong forces, pointed toward a realistic presentation of life, apparent in comedy, it would be only natural for other forms of the drama to be affected by them.

Yet voices arose during the eighteenth century against Shakespeare as a poet of realism. The realistic attitude which would condone any violation of the rules if it represented truth to life was constantly counteracted by a more rational and moralistic attitude. Francis Gentleman was enraged at the application of realism to the such "a female fiend" as Lady Macbeth: "If it should be urged, that such characters have been, and may be; I still contend, that they are among the frightful deformities and essential concealments of nature, which should be excluded from the stage. . . ."[74] E. Taylor accepted Shakespeare as often "natural," but, at the same time, objected to him as indecorous: ". . . there are parts of nature that require concealment . . . ," he wrote.[75] Shakespeare is excellent in the sublime, but undignified and immoral, low, and vulgar, in such scenes as that of the grave diggers. "The scene . . . is certainly real life," he admitted, "or as it is vulgarly termed, highly natural, yet how misplaced, how unworthy the tragedian."

[73a] The evidence for the presence of realism in 18th-century comedy is far too extensive to be treated here; clearly the subject demands a full and separate treatment, which I design to give in another article. Various aspects of the trend in comedy, as they are reflected in the criticism of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, are discussed by E. N. Hooker in the notes to his forthcoming edition of the critical works of John Dennis.

[74] *The Dramatic Censor* 1. 88.

[75] *Cursory Remarks*, 1774, p. 39.

William Richardson, one of the undoubted worshippers of Shakespeare and manifestly important for his emphasis upon characterization, still thought the playwright had gone too far in his following of nature. One must observe, however, that the attack was not on his life-like presentation of men and women, but on his too realistic *situations*, which permit the union of comedy with tragedy and meanness with dignity.[76]

These objections against Shakespeare's closeness to reality did not greatly affect his growing reputation. On the contrary, the recognition of the human qualities embodied in his characters led to a fuller acceptance of his artistry. It meant, for one thing, that his tragi-comedy, his lack of decorum, his low characters, his bombast, his vulgar diction, his florid and figurative language, and his violent expressions were on the way to be considered necessary to his realistic characterization, and not merely acceptable as, in an historical sense, the products of his day and age. It meant, moreover, that his apparent carelessness in the matter of historical details could be either forgiven on the grounds of realistic motivation necessary to the proper development of character, or accepted because the characters were as authoritative as history itself, since these details originated supposedly from a mind that was familiar with all the principles of human nature and knew, better than the historians themselves, how personages of the past were inclined to act under the stress of circumstance. It meant, also, that the realistic school of acting, under the leadership of Macklin and Garrick, could turn to Shakespeare for support against the earlier artificial acting of Quinn and others. It meant, in addition, that traditional type-portraiture had to yield to the original and life-like characters of Shakespeare, who frequently appeared to critics as live personages. It meant, finally, that the laws of neo-classic criticism gradually lost the prestige that was necessary to their existence, for the belief that poetry should imitate types or la belle nature could not hold its ground against the achievement of that dramatist. We are not surprised when we come upon such passages as the following from a letter Mrs. Montagu wrote to James Beattie:

[76] "On the Faults of Shakespeare," in *Essays on Some of Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters*, 5th ed., 1797, pp. 364-392.

As to Homer, we know little about him, he seems to paint exactly from the life, as our Shakespeare did, and as the first-rate genius's will always do, where there are not established laws of criticism, to which they must bend, and which set up a pattern and mode to work by.[77]

Nor are we surprised when we come upon Morgann's praise of the living reality of the poet. Much had been said about Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature and his ability to present "flesh and blood" characters in their fullest variety. What is particularly significant about Morgann's comments, however, is that he throws overboard the criteria of the rules, and recognizes in such a knowledge of human nature, combined with a natural or realistic presentation of character, the highest attainment of the poetic art:

. . . And this is in reality that art in *Shakespeare,* which, being withdrawn from our notice, we more emphatically call *nature.* A felt propriety and truth from causes unseen, I take to be the highest point of poetic composition. If the characters of *Shakespeare* are thus *whole,* and, as it were, original, while those of almost all other writers are mere imitation, it may be fit to consider them rather as Historic than Dramatic beings; and, when occasion requires, to account for their conduct from the *whole* of character, from general principles, from latent motives, and from policies not avowed. . . .[78]

The conception of Shakespeare as a poet of human nature was, thus, a most important element in preparing the way for the Romantic critics. By stressing everyday realities it served to place in disrepute traditional requirements that had been

[77] December 13, 1772, in *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* 1. 313-14. Shakespeare's "realism" played a very important part in the growing belief that truth to life was the highest morality in the drama. This meant that poetic justice was not only considered unnecessary to the drama, but by some actually immoral whenever it appeared to be unrealistic. This is a subject which merits a special article, which the writer intends some day to complete. It is related very closely to the growing emphasis upon a more empirical ethics. The following quotation from Henry Pemberton will suffice for the present to make this tendency clear: "The distinction, which ought to here be made, is between allowing in these poems no other intention than to exemplify some general maxim relating to men's conduct, and the more extensive design of exhibiting some finished picture of life, wherein may be exposed to view not only the natural consequences of human actions, but the tempers and passions of men, with the internal motives to good actions, and to those deviations from the general principles of virtue, which we daily see and lament in the world" (*Observations on Poetry,* 1738, pp. 17-18).

[78] *Essay on Falstaff,* p. 62 n.

outlived, and to show that dependence upon standards derived from abstract reason, idealized nature, and considerations of morality and propriety, was no longer necessary or desirable. The battle between authoritative, rational, and moral standards on the one hand, and a realistic picture of life on the other, is one of the most significant battles of the eighteenth century. Indeed, traditional rules of action always break down under the appeal to life. Many investigations into the criticism of the neo-classic period are involved and confusing, because they lose sight of this one principle. Johnson's common sense is, upon analysis, only his sense of the realities of life. The Romantic critics went further and made even the imaginative creations of the poet essentially real. Then, truly, no laws could bind him.

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